

9 Families
Emergency Architecture
A project by Torolab


January 11 - February 19, 2005

For their first solo exhibition in New York City, Torolab explores their concept of “emergency architecture.” This work is not a response to a singular catastrophic event but rather a means to address the widespread struggle for basic necessities that characterizes daily life in cities such as Tijuana.

Tijuana is the fastest growing city in Mexico, at the heart of a trans-border metropolitan region that stretches from Los Angeles in the north to Ensenada in the south. Every year millions pass through this frontier city and use it as gateway to the United States. Few think of Tijuana as their final destination; it is rather a necessary stop en route to opportunities and a better life. However, an increasing number of this itinerant population is making Tijuana its permanent home. This phenomenon is the focus of Torolab’s project, 9 Families.

What started as a project to design a house for Carmen Duran Ponce—a maquiladora (factory worker)—has become a proposal to develop a small community for nine families in Lagunitas, an underdeveloped neighborhood in Tijuana. Traditional planning and development has not been able to keep up with the growth of the city. The demand for affordable housing far exceeds what is available. Carmen and the other families currently live in neighborhoods and houses that lack basic infrastructure such as sewage, electricity and paved streets. Instead of architects, Torolab act as facilitators, working with the families through the process of designing their own homes. From the design and construction systems to the community organization, this project proposes an alternative model to both the families’ current situation and the surrounding suburban, gated developments that remain out of their reach. The project is represented by video interviews with the families, an abstracted model of the master plan and “ruido blanco” (white noise), a video piece that illustrates the context of the project through an analysis of the building materials used: tires, shipping pallets and used garage doors from the suburbs of San Diego.

Another form of emergency architecture, included in the exhibition, is addressed in “Survival Unit 7.0,” an individual survival module. The survival unit originated from the conditions of poverty in Tijuana, which has an impact very different from that of San Diego, where the homeless population inhabit the city streets and are, to some extent, visible. A prevailing sense of danger on the streets of Tijuana makes this kind of existence impossible—the homeless population is hidden. The survival unit is a backpack that transforms into a one-person shelter. This shelter attaches to an empty billboard which both protects the individual and camouflages the user into the sky-scape of the



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city-a field of empty billboards and electrical poles.

These and other projects by Torolab address the possibility of achieving a better quality of life in the urban environment. As artists, architects, designers and musicians, Torolab engages in a multi-faceted practice. They conduct contextual analyses that result in proposals for social change. Whether in Tijuana or other cities, Torolab works to reveal the specific needs of an environment and develops tools to help realize a wide range of possibilities.

Torolab was established in 1995 by Raúl Cárdenas Osuna as a spatial and contextual research laboratory located in Tijuana, México (www.torolab.co.nr). Torolab's work was the subject of a solo exhibition at the San Diego Museum of Art (2002), and their work has appeared at MACLA, San Jose; the Liverpool Biennial; and the 2002 Montreal Biennial, among other venues. New work by Torolab will also be featured at ARCO'05, in Madrid and at inSite_05 in San Diego/Tijuana.

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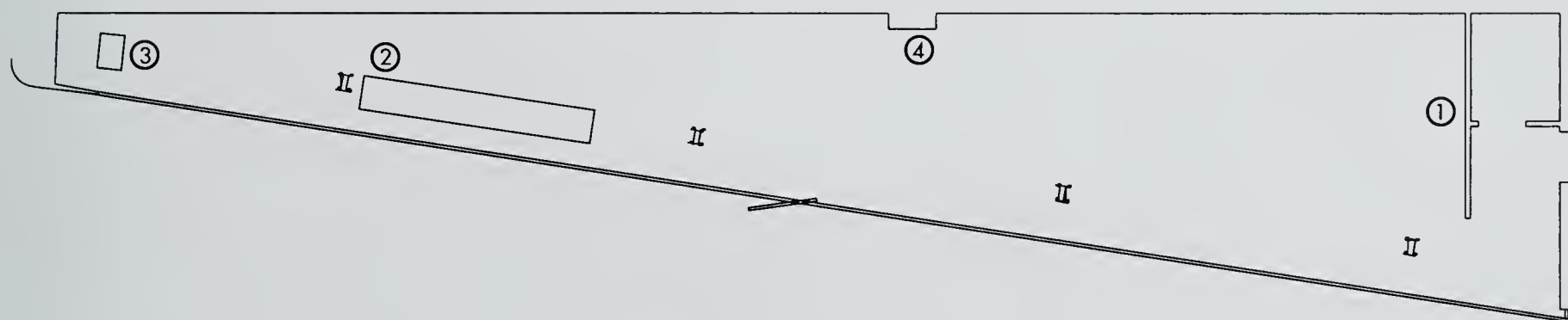
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floor plan



- ① S.O.S. arquitectura de emergencia/S.O.S. Emergency Architecture
9 Familias/9 Families, video, 13 minutes, 2004.
Interviews conducted with the participants of the 9 Families project.
 - ② 9 Familias/9 Families
Model of master plan, with projection, 5 minutes, 2005.
The projection includes contextual photos for the project (the participants, the site, as well as typical building techniques) and an animation of the site.
 - ③ Ruido Blanco/White noise
Part 3: Possibilities of Necessity; video, 7 minutes, 2001.
Music by Bostich: "Complacencias."
 - ④ Survival unit 7.01
Backpack, fabric, 2002.
- Torovestimenta
Transborder Trousers and t-shirt.

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Securitree by Torolab

Once known as the “valley of the heart's delight” --a region known for its rich agricultural history-- San Jose has re-positioned itself as the capital of Silicon Valley, the frontier of new technologies that make our lives better, a center for innovation. In the midst of the technology revolution, we also find ourselves in a location that is often described and lauded as relatively safe. While San Jose is not 100% free from urban problems such as gang violence, domestic abuse, drug dealing, etc. for the last several years it has earned the number one ranking as the “Safest Big City in America” with populations of over 500,000. This ranking, created by Morgan Quitno Press, is based on FBI crime statistics in six categories: murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, and motor vehicle theft. When talking about public space, issues of safety go hand in hand with those of surveillance and security.

At a national level, post September 11th has made the US heighten its safety concerns with additional constraints on airports, the creation of the Homeland Security Department complete with a color-coded system that ascertains the level of outside threat that is eminent at any given moment.

The lines between public and private life have blurred as technology has advanced. We are under surveillance and our movements during much of our day can be mapped through a variety of methods – from the ATM machine at the bank to the security camera at the entryway of corporate buildings. Our connections with cell phone towers to the global positioning systems in vehicles to the websites that are visited on the internet also track our every move and subsequent actions. These observations bring up questions: Are we a society under surveillance? What elements of privacy do we sacrifice in order to gain safety? What is it like to live in an urban environment that is allegedly so safe? These questions along with Torolab's observations of San Jose serve as a point of departure for this exhibition at MACLA.

Torolab, founded in 1995 by Raúl Cárdenas Osuna in Tijuana, B.C., Mexico is a consortium of artists, designers, architects, and musicians. As a laboratory of spatial investigations, art and contextual living phenomena they seek to establish deep relationships between people, ideas, and equipment for life. They have described their work as being primarily interested in proposition and not in protest. With their experiments, they search for the sublime in everyday life – the DNA of comfort and an atmosphere of warm humanism: to obtain a better quality of life. This utopian postulate situates Torolab as a catalyst for social change.

The main thrust of Torolab's explorations to date has occurred in the trans-border region of Tijuana-San Diego, a site that is fraught with complex relationships, social inequities and hybrid forms. All of their work has an element of social justice, responding to a real need. In prior projects, they have transformed museum security guards into DJs and VJs, created collaborative ad campaigns, proposed innovative methods for housing, and imagined utopian spaces that bridge gaps in transnational regions – all of these endeavors address “quality of life” issues -- lifestyles, from identity to housing to security to protection to surveillance.

Torolab's projects begin with an analysis of their environment, as context is a fundamental principle to the production of their work. The creation of the *Securitree* exhibition began with extensive research about the city of San Jose followed up by several visits. Through their process of investigation, they arrive with new proposals for their projects. Laying the foundation for the creation of their work, Torolab states “new necessities demand new programs, which demand new functions which equals new forms.” These new forms are what you see in the *Securitree* exhibition at MACLA.

But getting to these forms involved an extensive and thoughtful process comprised of research, analysis, questions, and dialogue. Through their interviews with people in San Jose, Torolab became intrigued about people's stories that centered on issues of security, surveillance and safety. People spoke about their interactions with the police; for example, a story of a Latino male who was pulled over and given a ticket because the license plate light on his car was not bright enough. Stories such as this suggest racial profiling, an issue that has plagued the San Jose Police Department in the past.

While riding the bus along San Carlos Street, Torolab interviewed a nurse who had worked in an emergency room for 20 years and told them of endless cases of violence in San Jose. On their first visit to San Jose Torolab observed an absence of police officers during the day and was shocked by the excess of officers that patrol the downtown streets on weekend nights. Compared to their home base of Tijuana, a convergence of that many police officers doesn't happen unless a murder has occurred.

These stories and their research inspired Torolab to ask: What should they watch? Should they survey people or places? What does San Jose represent as the capital of Silicon Valley? Is San Jose concerned about terrorism or do issues of safety come from residents against themselves? Torolab felt that appearances are deceitful in San Jose, that the “bad neighborhoods” are not as visibly tattered as those in Tijuana...yet, the public discourse about safety is a high-ranking priority. What are you willing to compromise to live in San Jose? Your youth? Living with racial profiling? Or perhaps simply, a sanitized orderly life devoid of “risk”?

After their initial research and observations of San Jose, Torolab convened an impromptu meeting of MACLA staff members and volunteers to talk about issues of safety, surveillance, and security. The data they received from this meeting, the stories they heard, and their own first hand observations, informed Torolab's decision to create the forms found in *Securitree*.

The elements of the ***Securitree*** exhibition include documentation of San Jose through photography and video, images and literature about security/safety/surveillance, urban apparel, “live” surveillance, and participatory devices through mapping and a survey. *Securitree* positions Torolab as a social provocateur who blurs the boundaries between art and life. Torolab has defined their intervention at MACLA as, “A *Securitree* is a project

for urban operations in actions of protection, strategies of dialogue, motives of security and decisions of surveillance whose structure and functioning are similar to those of a tree, but whose fruit is safety. "

TRANS(transmitter) tree is the first object that the viewer encounters in the *Securitree* project. Located on the sidewalk outside of MACLA's gallery, the white arborescent structure invades the public domain by surveying South First Street through the security cameras that are perched on its metal branches. Here data is collected and transferred to the screens located inside of the gallery on the **RECV(receiver) tree**.

The fourteen monitors on the *RECV tree* serves of a repository of images from different sources. Here "live" video from the *TRANS tree* is played next to the initial Torolab research interviews with MACLA staff and volunteers to other community members along with documentary footage of the streets of San Jose. The videos alter between jarring sound bites of personal observations and experiences to images of the San Jose landscapes with police car lights pulsating to the sounds of urban electronic music reminiscent of a cool music video. With the "live" video of the street in front of them, the viewer becomes a participant, or perhaps a voyeur in actions of surveillance.

In the **Lounge Area**, Torolab's hexagon sofa creates an inviting location to peruse through the four **Securitree Readers** comprised of articles about security, surveillance, policing, and the subsequent impact of these concerns on society. The first reader in the series is actually a binder, where visitors are asked to return and share articles they find with future gallery visitors. While most articles are reminiscent of a graduate school class reader filled with heady postmodern theories, *1984* - the classic text on totalitarian control and "big brother" by George Orwell concludes reader 4. Viewers can request to make copies of articles in the reader to take with them, thus adding to the "information is power" methodology of Torolab's work.

The **Photographs** on the wall are a collection of images taken by Torolab dealing with surveillance, security, safety and public space. Ranging from photos of police closing off downtown San Jose after the nightclubs close to security guards to sidewalks closed for safety during construction these images offer a snap shot of time, a mapping of a place through observations and experiences. Other images include a video monitor, advertisements, billboards, Border patrol and neighborhood watch signs, and strangely a large-scale sculpture featuring a NBA star constructed out of Legos located in the Milan airport-observing visitors.

Torolab invites the public to share their personal experiences by participating in the **Securitree Map** of San Jose utilizing stickers, markers and tape. This map works as a cognitive cartography, a tool that utilizes how people relate to a place by recognizing their environment through the creation of their own landmarks and as a situational map, a tool that is used to mark places by tracing events that have occurred.

Gallery visitors participate in the project by visualizing their spatial data of San Jose by the placement of stickers on the map. Created by Torolab these stickers have icons representing security, money, communication, neighborhood watch/surveillance, food, community gathering, violence, police, health, and lastly graphics of the both the *RECV* and *TRANS tree*. By placing the stickers on the map visitors tell their story of San Jose and create a dialogue with other viewers about their city.

Telling viewers that their opinion matters, Torolab asks people to share their thoughts through the **survey** in the gallery: Do they feel safe? What are they willing to compromise in order to have such safety? MACLA in turn will pass this information on to Torolab who will upload the data to their website -- www.torolab.com -- during the course of the exhibition.

In the late 20th century, the T-shirt became an urban marker of identity and self-representation. Three T-shirts from Torolab's clothing line, **ToroVestimenta** - one of the *TRANS tree*, another with a security guard in an observation booth, and the last with the omnipresent phrase, "we're on your corner" grace the walls and offer interested parties another form of urban intervention through fashion. Wandering through the city like the flâneur of 19th century Paris, the wearer of the T-shirt participates in an active mapping project, transmitting icons of surveillance.

The **White Video(TRANS)** playing in the projection room is the first in a trilogy of white videos for Torolab. This minimalist video begins with a series of faint blue *semillas* (seeds) floating onto the screen that grows as time progresses. Rhythmically moving to the electronic music, the seeds twirl, move off-screen and become hard black lines, inter-twisting cables that rotate. Next is the emergence of a white tree trunk positioned on the screen. Instead of leaves, from the branches of the tree, black fuzzy lines emerge to become mechanical renderings of security cameras. Once the tree is formed with all of its security cameras a circle emits from the base of a tree, transmitting information and generating more blue seeds to build a new tree. The science fiction treatment of this video is inspired by Torolab's home base of Tijuana. According to Torolab, Tijuana belongs more to exercises of science fiction than to history books, as it is nearly impossible to find someone who is a 4th generation resident. This rapid urban development in the region contributes to the science fiction nature of a place whose history is being written by the minute.

MACLA's mission statement speaks to our desire of being a space where Latino artists present new ideas, concepts, and forms that have the capacity to interpret, define and transform society. By commissioning this new work by Torolab we have created a working laboratory in the gallery not only for the artists, but also for the larger public as the work encourages participation and creates a space for dialogue amongst all who come in contact with this project.

Anjee Helstrup
Curator & Associate Director